

A Catholic priest accused of misconduct was suspended in Texas. Why did New Orleans let him preach?

Anthony Odiong was removed in 2019 over allegations of inappropriate behavior, but he continued to minister in New Orleans despite the archdiocese knowing about the complaints

The Guardian

Ramon Antonio Vargas *in New Orleans*

Thu 22 Feb 2024 13.29 EST

A

Catholic priest removed from his role at a New Orleans-area church in December over allegations of misconduct with multiple women was prohibited from working in and around Texas's capital for identical reasons in 2019, a diocesan official revealed in a privately sent letter obtained by the Guardian.

It is unclear why Anthony Odiong was permitted to continue ministering to parishioners who had no idea about his past. The Austin diocese, the first to suspend Odiong, said it notified the New Orleans archdiocese. The New Orleans archdiocese said it "acted in accord with civil, criminal and canon law" in its handling of Odiong but didn't elaborate.

Nonetheless, Odiong's removal from New Orleans constituted another scandal for the US's second-oldest Catholic diocese, which declared bankruptcy in 2020 while attempting to dispense with litigation stemming from the worldwide church's clerical molestation crisis. The Guardian has previously reported a series of controversies enveloping the organization, which has gone to unusual lengths to keep the abusive conduct of some of its priests and deacons from being

publicized.

Officials in Austin said they were publicly clarifying that Odiong has for years lacked permission to minister there as he defies administrative orders to return to the Nigerian diocese that ordained him, which, under Catholic church policy, retains the sole authority to substantially discipline him.

Odiong recently hosted a meeting with a large group of supporters near Austin, outlining a plan to run chapels at a Catholic university in Florida as well as asking for financial assistance.

According to audio of the meeting provided to the Guardian, that job at Ave Maria University would technically be a lay position, though Odiong said that nothing would prevent him from using the knowledge he had acquired from his clerical career. An official at the university said Odiong “is not now – nor will be – working at Ave Maria University in any capacity, neither as a priest nor as a layperson”.

In a letter to one woman who alleged misconduct by Odiong, the Austin diocese said: “We have asked our priests ... to inform parishioners that they not attend any event at which [Odiong] will be present or will lead.

“We encourage anyone providing funds to [him] for any purpose to exercise caution and to verify whether he has the permission to complete his stated intentions for those funds.”

Questions about Odiong’s handling by Louisiana and Texas diocesan officials have increased after three women shared with the Guardian details of complaints against him. They said Odiong tried to use his influence as a priest to pursue sexual contact they either did not welcome or could not consent to participate in. Neither church leaders nor civil authorities were meaningfully moved when they reported him, they said.

The women say their experiences with Odiong illustrate the US Catholic church’s reluctance to acknowledge that there is a disparity of power between parishioners and priests who position themselves as spiritual caretakers – then try to leverage physical relationships, despite the standard clerical promise to be celibate.

Though Vatican policy clearly defines sexual misconduct with children and vulnerable adults as punishable clerical abuse, some have pushed the global

Catholic church to broaden its definition of the latter category.

At present, a vulnerable adult is someone older than 18 who has “severe intellectual, developmental or psychological disabilities”, the Pillar, a Catholic news outlet, reports.

According to the Pillar, a growing number in the church would like the label to apply to adults targeted by priests who hold a spiritual authority over them that could affect sexual consent, especially after Cardinal Theodore McCarrick’s 2019 expulsion from the priesthood for, among other things, sexually preying on young men under his clerical authority.

Proponents of that movement point to how teachers, healthcare providers and corrections officers generally risk professional sanctions and even criminal prosecution if they seek sex with adult students, patients or incarcerated people, respectively, given the imbalanced power dynamics at play.

In fact, Texas is one of several states with a law that says it is impossible for there to be a consensual relationship between clergymen and adults who emotionally depend on their spiritual advice, though criminal indictments in such cases have been rare.

One woman said her dealings with Odiong were “not a situation of two adults on equal footing”.

The woman, who asked that she not be named, said: “The Catholic church conveniently seemed to not lend a whole lot of weight to that notion.”

‘The only woman’

Ordained in Uyo, Nigeria, in 1993, Odiong became a pastor at St Anthony of Padua in Luling, Louisiana, in about 2015. Claiming to have a special understanding with the Virgin Mary through prayer, the clergyman held healing masses that improved church attendance.

Some congregants would report recovering from major medical ailments after attending the charismatic Odiong’s healing masses, earning him popularity. He then raised enough money to build a healing chapel at St Anthony, opening it in 2020.

He also drew attention from diocesan officials in Austin and New Orleans

concerning his conduct with women.

Odiong, 55, was stationed in Austin in 2006 at the invitation of the bishop, Gregory Aymond, who later became archbishop of New Orleans. One of Odiong's assignments led him to work with Baylor University students, including a woman who described an unwanted sexual advance after she underwent confession.

In a written report, the woman recounted how Odiong – who was also pastor of St Mary's Church of the Assumption in West, Texas – embraced her tightly as she tried to leave his office, gazing into her pupils and saying "inappropriate romantic things about how my eyes had a 'wild beauty' and how I was the 'only woman who could ever touch his heart'".

Odiong was visibly aroused, grabbed the student's hand and "slowly and sensually kissed the top of [it] several times", the woman wrote. He then took "deep whiffs" of the woman's hand as he rubbed it around his face before allowing the woman to leave.

Soon, Odiong relocated to Rome "for more education", the woman wrote. Over the course of 2018 and 2019, she filed a complaint with law enforcement in her Missouri hometown and in Texas, and she alerted Austin and New Orleans church officials.

Discussions with law enforcement convinced the woman a criminal case would be difficult to prosecute. But there was one result: she learned the Austin bishop, Joe Vasquez, had told Odiong he was no longer permitted to minister there. And New Orleans' archdiocese was told that Odiong had been notified of his suspension from ministry, a spokesperson for Vasquez told the Guardian.

Yet that information apparently was not shared with the public despite Catholic officials' promises to handle clerical misconduct cases transparently.

Meanwhile, when approached by Odiong's accuser, a top aide to Aymond in New Orleans promised to "carefully" review the allegation, to follow up accordingly and to help however he could.

Odiong's work in Louisiana subsequently continued unabated.

A separate complaint – previously reported in the media and taken to church officials in both New Orleans and Austin around the time Odiong was suspended in

Texas – ultimately led to his removal in Louisiana. Media coverage of that Louisiana removal in turn prompted at least a third complaint to come to light.

‘A spiritual marriage’

The allegations that set the stage for Odiong’s Louisiana ouster came from a Pennsylvania woman who contacted authorities in 2019, alleging a years-long sexual relationship and financial abuse. The woman alleged she could not consent to sex with Odiong – or willingly give him money – because he was her spiritual adviser.

The woman contacted the sheriff’s office which patrols Luling, but investigators said they could not establish that a crime had occurred. She also called an archdiocese of New Orleans number for abuse claimants but said she was ultimately brushed off.

The woman again reported her allegations to the archdiocese by filing a claim for damages in the church bankruptcy. In December, the archdiocese forwarded her complaint to the sheriff’s office in Luling.

The Catholic church conveniently seemed to not lend a whole lot of weight to that notion

An Odiong accuser

Deputies once more concluded there was not enough evidence of a crime. But the archdiocese cited the complaint as justification to finally follow the Austin diocese and bar Odiong from ministering in the New Orleans area.

New Orleans’ archdiocese also announced that Uyo’s bishop had recalled Odiong.

Local and national news coverage of Odiong’s dismissal by the archdiocese of New Orleans encouraged a third known accuser to reveal herself.

That woman said she met Odiong in Texas in 2010 while he worked at Baylor, counseling her on her troubled marriage. Their discussions often centered on her sex life, she said, and she alleged he encouraged her to engage in forms of intercourse with which she was not comfortable, demanding she “report back to him on the result of having submitted to these ... activities”.

Eventually, Odiong told the woman he had fallen in love with her and her marriage

was not a “true” one. He proposed she enter into a “spiritual marriage” with him, courting her by serenading her over the phone with ballads, including Annie’s Song by John Denver.

Odiong convinced her to see him in his office on the night she flew back from her grandfather’s out-of-town funeral, the woman alleged. He closed the door, forcefully kissed her on the mouth, made her straddle his lap and groped her while he was palpably aroused.

The woman said she initially did not report Odiong because she wondered whether she was at fault. Yet when she learned that someone else had made similar allegations, she wrote to the Austin diocese.

On 7 February, a top aide to the Austin bishop issued a letter that assured the woman Odiong had not been welcome to minister locally for years. That was news to the woman, who had never known Odiong to be disciplined.

The letter also said Odiong had not been convicted of wrongdoing in either the criminal justice system or under church law. Nonetheless, the letter made clear Odiong was disobeying orders to return to Uyo, so the diocese was asking congregants to avoid him and to be careful about giving him money.

The woman who unsuccessfully reported Odiong to deputies in Luling, Louisiana, at one point received a letter from the Austin diocese expressing an “interest in assisting” her in connection with her allegations.

That letter stopped short of saying that Odiong had ever been suspended from ministering within the Austin diocese. The woman’s attorney, Kristi Schubert, said she is not aware of any other correspondence between her client and the Austin diocese.

‘Always a priest’

Several people in Texas are not heeding the Austin diocese’s warning.

In early February, Odiong and three couples invited residents of West, Texas, where he previously worked, to a potluck at a community center in Birome, just outside the Austin diocese.

There, Odiong said, as he has before, that he had been run out of Louisiana over

his opposition to Pope Francis's attempts to be more welcoming to LGBTQ+ people, who aren't allowed to marry within the Catholic church.

Odiong suggested he would take a sabbatical before he hoped to begin work overseeing chapels at Florida's Ave Maria University – as a layperson, technically, if necessary.

A university spokesperson denied Odiong had an employment opportunity there, saying all priests working for the school must be in good standing with their local diocese as well as have permission from the bishop of Venice, Florida, Frank Dewane. The spokesperson also said that the university had asked Odiong to “not make statements that he is coming to Ave Maria”.

In Birome, Odiong said US bishops could refuse to hire him as a clergyman but “cannot stop” his healing mission because he has not been ousted from the priesthood.

He also argued no one can make him return to Nigeria – where there has been violence against Christians – because he is an American citizen. And anyway, his bishop fully backed his presence in the US, he claimed, contradicting what the Austin diocese had said.

“A priest is always a priest,” Odiong said in an hour-long talk that intermittently drew laughter and applause. He added that he didn't believe any bishop should be able to “take the priesthood away from you”.

A spokesperson for the diocese of Fort Worth, which includes Birome, said Odiong was not welcome to minister there either. But one potluck organizer said on Facebook that Odiong was “welcome to bless us with his presence any time he wishes”.

“I still can't believe our bishop ... [is] openly asking us to turn our backs on him, going directly against the teachings of Jesus!” the woman wrote.

Another user said: “Father Anthony is not guilty of anything but speaking the truth.”

The woman who accused Odiong of forcefully kissing and groping her after her grandfather's funeral said she and his other accusers were the truthful ones. She said two of the women who had come forward against Odiong weren't seeking

damages but simply wanted to persuade officials to believe his accusers.

“This is a pattern of behavior affecting multiple people,” she said. “And these allegations are credible.”